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Cover illustration: *An offering for  
May Day*, Walter Crane, 1894.

# The Co-operator

VICTORIA'S JOURNAL OF CO-OPERATIVE AFFAIRS

NO 1

*The Co-operator* is published every month by Gay Publications Co-operative Limited, 87 King William Street, Fitzroy 3065, Victoria. *The Co-operator* welcomes contributions from all sections of the co-operative movement throughout Victoria. Articles should be typed, preferably double-spaced, and should reach *The Co-operator* no later than the last Friday of the month prior to publication. Receipt of articles will be taken by the Editor as constituting permission to publish unless the contrary is specifically indicated. Typescripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope. All articles submitted for publication must carry the name and address of the author. Signed articles do not necessarily represent the views of Gay Publications Co-operative. The Editor reserves the right to edit all articles prior to publication.

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## Editorial

# Here We Are

The last few years have seen the emergence of a new breed of co-operative in Australia. Unlike the traditional producer and consumer co-operatives, these new organisations focus on socially significant issues such as housing and unemployment. They arise not only at a time when these problems are of pivotal importance, but when questions regarding the future directions of the co-operative movement are being addressed through government programs and legislative changes, as well as by co-operatives themselves.

Among this new generation of organisations are the industrial or worker based co-operatives. While these employee-controlled businesses are an established phenomenon overseas, they are a relatively recent innovation in this country, where they have already been beset with pressures and criticism. Not only are they viewed with scepticism by many elements of the established co-operative movement, they are often considered with suspicion by both private industry and the trade union movement. At the moment, only a handful of these ventures exist, most of them small, struggling enterprises. Yet overseas experiences, particularly in Spain, Italy and France demonstrate that this sector of the co-operative movement has the potential to expand dramatically, and rapidly. Indications are that this pattern will be repeated in Australia.

As a background to this growth, many other changes of relevance to the co-operative movement are occurring. The current Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operatives (discussed elsewhere in this publication) is considering significant changes to legislation which will affect all co-operatives in Victoria. Government programs supporting the development of co-operatives have received endorsement at State and Federal levels and appear certain to continue and grow. Alternative methods of funding the expansion of a co-

operative base are being discussed and considered. Groups of unemployed people are beginning to seriously consider worker-controlled employment as an alternative to placement in the workforce (or the dole queue), just as Governments search for alternatives to short term employment programs.

At this time, the need for a forum to encourage the exchange of information, ideas, problems and solutions has led to the establishment of this journal. *The Co-operator* is intended to be a vehicle with which to document the emergence of these new organisations and, it is hoped, the emergence of a co-operative sector. It aims to consider relevant issues and problems ranging from proposed legislative changes, to finance and funding. In these pages you will find coverage of subjects as diverse as industrial democracy, occupational health and safety, affirmative action, marketing and promotion, trade union relations, taxation, co-operative development and education, and more. *The Co-operator* will present news, information, reviews, and case studies, as well as providing a forum for disagreement and debate. It is a monthly magazine, published by the Gay Publications Co-operative under the auspices of the Victorian Ministry of Employment and Training.

This twenty-page first edition is a modest beginning for a publication. In time we intend to grow along with the co-operative movement we hope to serve. In order to best cater for your needs we solicit your criticisms, support, letters, advertising, and especially, your contributions.

If you would like to continue receiving *The Co-operator*, fill out the subscription coupon on the back cover. For advertising inquiries, contact our advertising representative Ken Allison on (03) 419 9877. We look forward to your continued support. ■

The Editor



## News

# Minister Launches Workplace Democracy Video

On June 27th, the Victorian Minister for Employment and Training, Mr Jim Simmonds, launched a new video produced by Film Victoria for the department's Publications and Publicity Unit. The video, called *Workplace Democracy, The Co-operative Way*, focusses on the Ministry's Co-operative Development program.

The video is a factual and commonsense introduction to co-operatives. Commitment, planning and education are emphasised as critical to their survival. The video features representatives from the Centre for Training at Preston TAFE, the Legal and Registry Division of the Ministry of Housing, Holmesglen TAFE, the Ministry of Employment and Training and several co-operatives, including Bendigo Trading Co-op, Correct Line Graphics, Gay Publications Co-op and Hodja.

In launching *Workplace Democracy, The Co-operative Way*, Mr Simmonds said that it marked a new stage in the development of the Co-operative Development Program, fulfilling as it did the internationally recognised principle of co-operative education. He said that the video was an excellent introduction to the principles of co-operation, the incorporation process, membership of co-operatives and involvement in co-operatives.

"The videotape is important because its approach is based on commonsense and practical advice. The temptation to be mere propaganda is avoided", the Minister said. "It is a first step by the Ministry in establishing systematic and comprehensive co-operative information."

Further educational projects by the Ministry are in preparation, the Minister said. These will



● Mr Jim Simmonds launches *Workplace Democracy*

include pamphlets addressing questions such as occupational health and safety, affirmative employment, industrial relations and trade unions as they relate to co-operatives. A series of co-operative case studies is also being prepared. The studies will deal with areas such as relationships with trade unions, the extent and experience of industrial democracy, co-operative education and training, industrial relations and equity.

In addition, Mr Simmonds said, a workshop program will be introduced. There will be two types of workshops; conversion and start-up. Both workshops will be introductory and delivered on a regional basis. The conversion co-op workshops will be targetted on companies which could convert into co-operatives.

It is hoped that these workshops will attract owners, workers and their unions. The start-up co-operative workshops will be targetted on individuals and groups interested in starting co-operatives. The workshops will complement the co-operative intenders and new enterprise courses being developed at Preston TAFE. These are courses designed by the Ministry and Preston TAFE to assist people setting up or involved in co-operatives.

*Workplace Democracy, The Co-operative Way* runs for 18 minutes and is available on a loan basis (half-inch VHS or ¼ inch). Bookings may be made by telephoning (03) 658 6368, the Publication and Publicity Unit of the Ministry of Employment and Training. ■

# Six Hundred at Co-op Seminar

More than six hundred people from all sectors of the Co-operative sector were at the Exhibition Building on June 23rd for a seminar, The Development of the Co-operative Movement in Australia, jointly sponsored by the Victorian Ministries of Employment and Training, and Housing, and organised by the Victorian Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation. The all-day seminar was designed to bring together the various diverse components of the co-operative sector to share experiences and ideas and to convey their concerns to government. Three ministers took part in the seminar, Mr Jim Simmonds (Employment and Training), Mr Race Mathews (Police and Emergency Services and Arts), and Mr Ian Cathie (Housing and Industry, Commerce and Technology). The seminar was chaired by Mr Andrew McCutcheon, MLA for St Kilda.

In his opening address to the seminar, Mr. Simmonds cited the six internationally recognised principles of co-operation, and said that these principles were in line with the Victorian government's policy and priority commitments.

"In its ten-year economic strategy, the government has committed itself to the broad goal of increased prosperity for all Victorians based on economic growth", the Minister said. "The government's specific policy and priority commitments include occupational health and safety, equal opportunity and affirmative employment, industrial democracy, employment maintenance and creation and assistance for low income groups. The ability and willingness of co-operatives to meet these policy and priority commitments is being demonstrated in my Ministry's Co-operative Development Program.

"Subsequent to the election of the Labor Government in April 1982, the program's objectives



● Part of the audience at the co-ops seminar

and guidelines were revised. There is now a clear emphasis on industrial democracy, and developing the workplace rights of workers, and increased emphasis on economic viability."

Mr. Simmonds said technical and financial assistance to co-operatives under the program depended on their meeting four conditions. These were that they must demonstrate actual or potential economic viability within a reasonable time period, that they must apply co-operative principles in practice, that they must demonstrate a commitment to making workplaces democratic, and they must create and maintain jobs in supported co-operatives. "The funded co-operatives are demonstrating the potential to develop co-operative principles in practice", he said.

The Minister spoke about the relationship between the co-

operative movement and the trade union movement. "Workers and unions have reservations about worker co-operatives", he said. "There are four major reasons for this. First, there are no successful worker co-operatives in Australia. Secondly, the co-operative sector and movement in Australia is no different in attitudes and behaviour from other employers. Thirdly, it is assumed that worker co-operatives are a form of employee ownership. Fourthly, worker co-operative supporters include spokespersons who see these co-operatives as a form of privatisation.

"Australia does not have a continuing history of surviving worker co-operatives. There are no worker co-operative models which have survived for long periods. In Australia the co-operative sector and movement are dominated by agricultural



and consumer co-operatives. These co-operatives have tended to exclude workers from decision-making.

"There are examples of employee-owned companies. However in these companies the number of shares held determines the number of votes, and the former management usually owns and controls the new company. In contrast, worker co-operatives are fully democratic — that is, one person has one vote.

"Trade union support is critical to the development of worker co-operatives. It depends on the establishment and development of economically viable enterprises which survive in the long term, the willingness and ability of the co-operative to become fully unionised, the observance of industrial awards, the ability of the co-operatives to effectively democratise workplaces, and the development of the workplace rights of workers. Also, the amount of worker equity should be low. It should not be necessary for workers to put superannuation funds or their savings into co-operatives. Workers should not have to buy jobs for themselves.

"The fact that workers in a co-operative are also the owners does not eliminate the need for trade unions. Grievances will still exist between individual workers and other workers and between workers and management."

On the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation (MACC), Mr Simmonds said that the establishment of the committee was an excellent basis for developing the co-operative movement in Victoria. "It has produced a comprehensive and thought-provoking information paper," he said. "This paper and the conference provide a genuine basis for those involved in co-operatives to effectively participate in the decision-making process.

"The committee's work is to be further developed and complemented by working parties on worker, consumer, community service and marketing/producer co-operatives. It is committed to the production of

interim and final reports, and there will be opportunities for public comment on each of these reports.

"The MACC information paper will be complemented by a review of worker co-operatives commissioned by myself. The review considers the policies currently being adopted and developed under my Ministry's co-operative development pro-



gram. It is a comprehensive analysis which considers among other things occupational health and safety, industrial democracy, award and industry practice wage levels, demarcation practices, unionisation of co-operatives, equity requirements for workers, and the distribution of surplus and residual assets. The policy review will be released shortly for public comment.

"Victoria is providing a model for other states and the Commonwealth in how to proceed with co-operatives. I am very pleased that my Ministry has been able to support MACC through the provision of financial and technical resources."

The following are some contributions to the day's discussions. Irena Davis, Housing worker, Williamstown Rental Housing Co-operative:

"I want to focus on the problems that are currently facing Rental Housing Co-operatives (RHC's), as funded by the Ministry of Housing. There are four main problem areas. Firstly, the fact that we are funded by

the Ministry of Housing, where there is very little understanding of what a co-operative is, and of the processes that are involved in making collective decisions, especially with a group of people who may not have previously been involved in working in a group at all.

"Within the Ministry of Housing there is a lack of policies and processes for working with RHCs which creates daily problems for the co-operatives trying to function. For example, there are no processes for initial renovations, no clear processes for house-buying, or consultations with tenants on any of these matters, no formula for cyclical maintenance. Within the Ministry itself there is a lack of co-ordination and information-sharing between the various sections of the Ministry that must deal with RHCs.

"Secondly, the existing pieces of legislation under which an RHC can incorporate, namely the Co-operation Act and the Housing Act as recently amended, do not fully recognise collective decision-making processes, and neither of those pieces of legislation recognise that all members of an RHC are equal in their responsibility to that co-operative. The requirements of both of those pieces of legislation to keep a multitude of registers, to have boards of directors that meet regularly, and complicated bookkeeping requirements, are often either irrelevant to the mainstream operation of an RHC, or are so bewildering to its members that they feel they have to rely on experts, thus undermining their ability to run their own co-op themselves.

"The Residential Tenancies Act fails to recognise the unique position of RHC members, in that they are both tenants and landlords at the same time, and there are problems with that legislation because of that.

"Thirdly, under the Co-operation and Housing Acts, the Registrar of Co-operatives is responsible to the Minister of Housing, who is also the Minister who is responsible for the funding of RHCs. This means that if RHCs do anything of which their fund-

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ing body disapproves, the legal arm, that is the Registrar, can be called in to pull them into line, using some technicality of either the Co-operation Act or the Housing Act. This has already happened with one RHC, where an administrator has been appointed, even though there was no suggestion of financial mismanagement or improper decision-making processes. In comparison, just recently, as you've probably been reading, the Corporate Affairs Department has been investigating the VFL, because more than half the clubs are technically bankrupt. I think the VFL should be grateful that it isn't funded by the Ministry of Housing, and regulated by the Registrar of Co-ops.

"The last area of concern for RHCs is that we need to find funding for co-ops outside the Ministry of Housing, outside of direct government control. Because once the government holds the purse-strings they also then seem to want to have their finger in every pie."

**Bob Cayzer**, Director, Glass Glow Conversion Co-operative.

"Particular points I would like to present to this seminar are:

1. **Membership.** We firmly believe that worker members should at all times control the co-operative. Although we have provided for non-worker members, these people are those who can contribute to the overall wellbeing and continued viability of the society, and in our case consist of a solicitor, an engineering consultant, and a qualified accountant.

2. **Trade Unions.** We see an advantage in worker-members belonging to the appropriate industry-based trade union. While it goes without saying that co-operative members will vote themselves at least award wages and conditions, there is still a responsibility on workers to support the trade union movement in the maintenance of such awards. Other benefits of union involvement with a workers' co-op include education facilities to assist with the development of our industrial rela-

Continued on page 18

## MACC Report

In February 1984, the Minister of Housing, Ian Cathie, appointed a Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation (hereafter referred to as MACC) to review the Co-operation Act and to identify appropriate mechanisms for developing the co-operative Act. This committee is a direct descendant of the Legislative Review Committee appointed by the Minister in June 1982, which recommended the formation of such a review body with co-operative, public servant, Governmental and expert representation.

It is intended that MACC will issue an interim report by the end of September 1984, and a final report by February '85. It is hoped that its recommendations will be translated into a legislative program late in '85.

Because the legislative changes will effect all existing co-operatives and in fact, will help shape the development of the parties, whether co-ops or in-

dividuals, make their views and recommendations known to MACC BEFORE IT PRODUCES its interim report. This can be done either through direct representation to MACC, or through one of its four working parties. At the time of going to press, the official closing date for submissions was July 31st, however indications existed that this deadline may well be extended. Criticism has been levelled that the existing deadlines have not allowed sufficient consultation or even awareness to percolate through to interested parties.

MACC consists of the following ten representatives: **Andrew McCutcheon** - Chairperson (MLA for St Kilda) **Bill Kilpatrick** - Convenor (Registrar of Co-operatives) **Hon. Race Mathews** (Minister for Police & Emergency Services, and the Arts) **Roy Gilbert** (Permanent Head of Ministry for Housing) **Bill Rawlinson** (Co-operative Federation of Victoria) **David Griffiths** (Co-operative

## MACC Project Worker

The Brunswick Italo-Australian Employment Co-operative has received a grant from the Ministry of Employment and Training to employ a project worker to assist the co-operatives in the Co-operative Development Program to organise submissions to the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation (MACC). **Jim Asker** from the Brunswick Co-operative to this position. Over the next few weeks Jim will be contacting the co-operatives in the program to solicit their views on the issues to be covered by MACC.

These issues include the philosophy and principles of co-operation, the relation of those principles to the different forms of co-operative and their practice, and the policies of co-operatives on such matters as the rights of workers, occupational health and safety, and job creation and maintenance.

Jim will be assisting the co-operatives to make recommendations to MACC both individually and collectively. This work will be undertaken over August and September. This is a very short time to complete the amount of work required, but the present timetable of MACC precludes the acceptance of submissions after September. If the timelines for submissions are not extended this may detrimentally affect the quality of submissions from the funded co-operatives.

Following this Jim will help the co-operatives to examine their legal basis under the present legislation and to formulate recommendations for legislative reform. He will also be assisting them to assess the Labor Resource Centre / Transnational Co-operative study, Workers' Co-operatives, A Policy Review.

The project has been granted office space by the Brunswick Council and this will be situated with the Council CEP project office at the corner of Lygon and Edward Sts, Brunswick. ■



Development Program, Ministry Employment and Training) **Barry Pullen** MLC (Employment and Training ALP Caucus Committee) **Joe Burke** (Personal Advisor to the Minister for Employment and Training, Hon Jim Simmonds) **Rob Carter** (Personal Advisor to the Minister of Housing, Hon Ian Cathie) **David Dinning** (Victorian Credit Co-operative Association)

MACC has also established four working parties to consider the needs of various vested interest groups. These groups and their convenors are: Producer co-ops: **Bill Rawlinson**, Consumer co-ops: **David Dinning**, Community Service co-ops: **Barry Pullen**, Worker co-ops: **David Griffiths**.

their consistency with the principles of the labour movement. 4. To assess whether co-operatives and their development are consistent with Government policy and in particular with Government policy on:-

Maintenance and creation of Jobs

Assisting low income groups  
Developing the rights of workers

Workplace democracy

Occupational health and safety

5. To consider how changing economic, social and political factors have affected the philosophy and principles of co-operatives.

6. To formulate sets of guidelines for the practical application of the Government's role in

existing co-operatives to develop and implement co-operative principles. This includes consideration of whether such a service should be centralised, its relationship to different sectors of the co-operative movement, and the role of government and trade unions in shaping such facilities.

2. Trade Unions: Unlike some overseas countries, Australia has no history of association between the co-operative and trade union movements. Particularly with the emergence of worker-based co-operatives, the need to develop an understanding between these two groupings is imperative.

3. Role of Government: While government has genuine concerns as to the stability and proper management of co-operatives, and to the promotion of co-operative practice consistent with government objectives, this must be balanced against the historical independence of the co-operative movement. The role of government in providing finance or financial guarantees to the co-operative movement is therefore a primary concern. 4. Finance: The historical difficulties encountered by co-operatives in obtaining venture capital may require the provision of new financial services. Options such as the establishment of a Co-operative Bank and the means by which it may be underwritten will be considered along with alternatives.

5. Structure and Principles: Representing the needs of a variety of different types of co-operative, establishing guidelines for membership and management, and the provision of legal protection as well as constraints on co-operatives will all require changes to the existing co-operative legislation.

Those groups or individuals interested in making representations on these or any other aspect of co-operative legislation, or requiring further information, should contact: The Secretary for MACC; **Maureen Hopper**, at Myer House, 250 Elizabeth St., Melbourne, 3000. Phone 669 1100. ■

**Danny Vadasz**

Gay Publications Co-operative



●MACC Chairperson Andrew McCutcheon.

Working parties have also been convened to consider Trade unions (Convenor: Andrew McCutcheon), and Aboriginal co-ops. The task of these working parties will be to review relevant submissions received by MACC, and to make recommendations about their respective areas of investigation.

The terms of reference adopted by the Ministerial Advisory Committee are as follows:

1. To establish the philosophy and principles embodied in co-operation and identify the essential elements of co-operative theory and ideology.

2. To examine the philosophy and principles embodied in the different forms of co-operatives currently in existence and assess

establishing and assisting:-

Co-operation between co-operatives

Industrial/Economic democracy

Assisting low income groups  
Protecting the rights of the co-operative worker

The marriage of commercial principles and practice with social commitment.

The advisory committee has published an Information Paper which addresses these issues and can be obtained by writing to MACC, c/o GPO Box 1670N, Melbourne, 3001. Some of the specific issues to be dealt with by MACC include:

1. Co-operative Development: The provision of an integrated and ongoing support system of education to assist intending and

## Co-op of the Month

# Open Channel

Open Channel Co-operative Ltd is Australia's largest community-based video organisation. Based in Victoria St., Fitzroy, Open Channel operates a broadcast-standard television studio and production and post-production facilities, as well as domestic standard cameras, recorders and editing systems. Open Channel runs a comprehensive training program to assist members of the public, community groups and independent film and video producers.

Open Channel has four principal objectives. These are: to provide an environment to stimulate the production of creative and socially relevant television, to acquire and operate a Public Television licence in Melbourne, to provide an adequate colour video resource for videomakers in Melbourne, and to minimise the co-operative's reliance on Government support. Apart from being a funded co-operative under the Co-operative Development Program, Open Channel receives support from the Australian Film Commission.

Open Channel is a membership co-operative with over 200 shareholders, who pay a \$30 entrance fee and purchase a \$10 shareholding.

The Co-operator spoke to Kim Dalton, General Manager of Open Channel Co-operative.

*Could I begin by asking you to tell us a bit about Open Channel's history, and about the nature of its current operations?*

Open Channel started in 1974, and at that stage it was one of a number of video access centres, that were set up around Australia by the Federal Government. The aims and ideals of these video access centres were to provide access to video equipment and video production, for members of the community to come and learn how to use the video equipment so that they could go out and make their own video programs. The reason it happened then was because that was then half-inch reel-to-reel black-and-white video equipment first became available, and the technology actually allowed something like that to develop.

Leading on from that, Open Channel became quite involved in the campaign for public television, because since the equipment provided the possibilities for people to make the programs, so the next logical step seemed to be to have access to a television station so that the material could then be broadcast, and run and operated in the same way that public radio stations are run.

So by the late '70s, Open Channel was a video access centre, and it was involved in the campaign for public television. In 1978 we set up here in Victoria St., with the assistance of the Australian Film Commission, with much more sophisticated, broadcast-quality equipment. We're now set up so



● Open Channel's Kim Dalton

that we can still provide that access facility, we equipment here so that people can come in and learn about it and make their own programs, but we're also involved in making programs for community organisations, for government departments, for television stations.

When Open Channel started, it began with a staff of two people, a turnover of 20 or 30,000 dollars, and an assets base on perhaps \$30,000. Today we have a full-time staff of 14 people, and there's about another half-dozen working here on short-term contracts. We have a turnover of approaching three-quarters of a million dollars, and our assets base is now approaching half a million dollars.

*Why did Open Channel decide to become a co-operative, and how do its decision-making processes reflect its co-operative nature?*

Open Channel is a membership-based co-operative, with nearly 200 shareholders. We have quarterly general meetings, and we have an Annual General Meeting, at which there's a Board of Directors of seven elected. The Board has one staff representative on it. Open Channel became a co-operative at the time of its foundation because part of the reason for an organisation like Open Channel being established was a belief that the means of production of video should be owned and controlled by the community rather than being privately





● Part of Open Channel's video-editing facilities

owned as are most production companies. It was felt that part of the philosophical base of the organisation was that the equipment and facilities should be there to serve the needs of the community, and that it should be owned and controlled by that group of people.

It seemed at the time that a co-operative, as a legal entity, was the most appropriate structure to establish, which would allow people to participate in some of those decision-making processes but which would also allow us a fair degree of flexibility as a trading organisation, to be a business as well.

*And what's the division of authority, as it were, between the members of the co-operative, the management, and the workers here?*

Well, it's changed, over the ten years that Open Channel's been going, it's changed considerably. When it first started there were one or two people on staff, it was a fairly small organisation. The membership was much smaller, and the organisation used to run on the basis of very regular general meetings, and all major decisions were in fact made at weekly general meetings, then it became monthly general meetings. What we have now, as I said before, it quarterly general meetings and an Annual General Meeting. The Board meets once a month. What's really happened is that if you have a membership of 200 and a staff of 14,

and complex business operations to run, you can't run an organisation like that on the basis of weekly membership meetings to make all those decisions.

That causes tensions, not necessarily tensions between individuals, but tensions within the organisation about conflicts of interest or over how much access people can really have to certain areas of decision-making. What we've been trying to do recently, to maintain as much of a democratic and open style of decision-making as possible, is that we've established a committee structure which is related to the Board. That looks at all our major areas of decision-making, such as equipment purchase, for example.

*Do the workers here meet as a group to deal with workplace related questions such as work-flow?*

Yes, we do, although, once again, it's something that's under review at the moment. We do have regular staff meetings where the whole staff come together and discuss a variety of issues. There's very little discussions about work-flow or issues like that because we're a fairly structured organisation, and because of the nature of the business. We rely on fairly highly trained and highly skilled people, and there's no way that you can become an electrical engineer overnight. So the staff doesn't meet and decide those sorts of questions.

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It is a matter of concern, and it's something that we're trying to solve, that when you do have a staff of 14 people, just getting hold of them all at once for several hours to discuss matters is difficult, and to have really substantial and meaningful discussion among that number of people is not an easy thing to do. There are a couple of smaller staff committees that meet and deal with specific areas.



Brendan Hennessy

#### ● In Open Channel's production studios

*What's been the history of Open Channel's involvement with the Co-operative Development Program? When did you first become involved with it?*

Open Channel became involved with the Co-operative Development Program at the inception of the program. We had contact with them in 1981-82, and we received a grant from them in 82-83. We've received two grants from them so far, and we've applied for a third and what presumably will be a final grant this year. The Co-operative Development Program for the most part has been involved in funding worker co-operatives, and we're not a worker co-operative; we're a membership co-operative. At the same time, their interest in Open Channel as a co-operative was the fact that we're a very significant organisation in the area where we work. We're the largest organisation of our type in Australia, and we're involved in a very important area in social terms, since for the most part the media in Australia is in private hands.

We attempt to operate in accordance with a whole range of co-operative principles, and that was the reason that we approached co-operative Development Program for assistance, and I think that's probably the reason why they've continued to provide us with that support.

*How useful have you found the Program's services such as education and training and business management advice to be?*

I think they've been improving. Over the last twelve months my feeling is that there's been quite a big improvement in terms of the sort of assistance that Open Channel's been getting from

the Program, and most of that's had to do with the links that they've formed with Preston, and therefore the sort of assistance we've been getting from Preston. Certainly in the several months that we spent developing our business plan this year, the consultants that were provided through Preston, and some of the initial help that Preston provided themselves, was of very great assistance in terms of coming to terms with certain areas of Open Channel and our operation.

In the area of education and training I think there's a lot of room for improvement, and that there could be a lot more assistance provided by the Co-operative Development Program. My sense is that that will change, and that more of that assistance will be provided by Preston. Perhaps it's just a matter of educating people out at Preston as to what is needed, as well as to what our needs are; an exchange of information between ourselves and the department and Preston itself.

I think that one of the problems that co-operative like ours faces, and I suspect it's probably similar to a lot of co-operatives, is that we all tend to be fairly isolated within the business area that we're working in. We have very little contact in an ongoing sense with our competitors, who are all private companies and who often don't particularly like us, because of some of the things that we stand for and some of the ways that we're trying to operate. So we're isolated in that sense. We're also isolated in that there's not a body of expertise and information in Australia in how to run a business according to co-operative principles, and so to a certain extent we have to go through a slow process of making mistakes and learning from them. I hope that one of the main inputs that the department can have, and Preston as well, is to try and gather together some of that experience, and assist in its exchange, so that other people coming along don't make the same mistakes we have.

*What are the major areas of occupational health and safety that arise in the nature of Open Channel's business?*

As a video production and facilities hire organisation, really that major areas that we feel concerned about are questions to do with ergonomics and screen-based equipment. We have administrative staff who sit behind desks typing for a fair amount of the time. We also have people in the role of editors, who might spend, say, eight to ten hour shifts sitting behind banks of video monitors editing. So that raises questions of eye-strain, back-strain, posture and those sorts of things. We've gone some way ourselves towards solving some of those problems by attempting to introduce more appropriate furniture, such as ergonomic chairs, for example.

What we want to happen, and what we hope to have the assistance of the Co-operative Development Program to do, is to have a full health and safety audit done here. We also have a health and safety committee made up of staff members, who have begun to discuss some of these questions. But until we have some input from an expert to guide us a bit, there's not a lot we can do. ■



## Health & Safety

# Repetition Injury: The Curse of the Keyboard

*Interview with Dr David Kotzman, occupational health worker in the field of repetition stress injuries.*

*Could you briefly outline the different types of repetition injury that are being seen at present?*

I think it's really important to understand that the term tenosynovitis is only referring to one particular condition in a whole group of conditions, and the group of conditions can effect a number of different structures. Tenosynovitis really refers to inflammation of the tendon sheath (teno meaning tendon, synovium, the sheath, and itis inflammation of), and there are a number of other structures that can also get inflamed and quite commonly do get inflamed. The tendon itself can be inflamed (tendonitis), the muscle can be inflamed, and this is quite common (myositis or myofasciitis), and also the point where the muscle joins the bone can be inflamed (tennis elbow or golfers elbow, medial or lateral epicondylitis). Most people have a combination of all those factors involved. People with repetition strain injuries almost always have tenderness in a number of areas, so the term tenosynovitis is a misleading one. Unfortunately a lot of people think they have tenosynovitis, but when they go and see insurance doctors, they can be told "No, you haven't got tenosynovitis!"

There is a reluctance to recognise the more general muscular condition amongst the medical profession. This is changing, but slowly. Tenosynovitis has been recognised for a long time, but some of these other more diffuse conditions, particularly of the muscle, are less recognised. The combination

of all these things together seems to be something that's only recently been recognised. Whether it's been around for a long time or not we just don't know.

*Is it true that repetition stress injuries have become more common in recent times, or is it that they're only just now being recognised?*

Certainly they've become more common in terms of the number of people presenting with problems of pain in their arms. Whether that's due to an increased incidence or whether it's due to increased detection is hard to tell. Although, the numbers are so large that I think there must be an increased incidence as well as increased awareness. If there are in fact more cases, then I think it's

due to a number of factors. First of all, new technology, which has meant an increased pace of work. People are working faster and doing more individualised tasks than they were before. Secondly, I think the recession has probably played a part in a sense that there's been an increased pressure of work on people, with fewer staff doing the same amount of work. Another thing that has probably contributed has been some of the trade-offs as a result of the 35-hour week campaign, such as productivity deals that have cut out rest breaks, and resulted in people doing the same amount of work in fewer hours, so that people are putting more stress on their bodies in that way.

*Continued on next page.*





Continued from previous page.

*What have been the particular changes in workplace technology and in particular, office technology, that have made the problems more common recently?*

Well, I guess the most obvious one, if you look at the numbers of people that we're seeing with repetition strain injuries, the biggest group of people who present are those with keyboard type occupations. That includes data processor workers, and increasingly also people working on word processors, and typists. They're the largest groups. But we are also seeing people involved in clerical occupations.

*Are these problems also arising in non-office workplaces such as assembly lines?*

Yes, there are big problems in blue-collar areas as well, because I think the same kind of process has been going on; an increase in the work pace, and increasing individualisation of tasks to the point where people are just doing one twist of a knob instead of several different tasks, and I think that's contributed to the very high incidence of these injuries among blue collar workers. But we hear a lot more about white collar workers because they're more vocal.

*We're getting the impression that the medical profession hasn't got much of a clue about what to do about these injuries.*

In terms of what to do about them, I think that's certainly true. There really is no medical magic answer to these problems, except for rest. That's the only recognised treatment that has any major effect on the problem. It's fair to say that there are a number of different grades of the problem, starting off with minor symptoms, cases where it's probably OK to continue work. We try and grade the symptoms according to severity, based on the amount of time the symptoms extend after a particular task is done.

*Are these problems inseparable from the new office technology, or are there ways work can be organised to minimise these risks?*

Certainly there are things that can be done to reduce the risk

of the problem. There are things that can be done in terms of the equipment, and there are things that can be done in terms of work organisation and work flow. I think that's a particularly important problem in places which tend to function on a "crisis model" of organisation, where you get a sudden, huge, influx of work. The responsibility for doing that work



tends to fall on the person with the least power in the organisation — usually the typist. Everybody else rushes around importantly saying "This submission has to be in yesterday!" but the person who actually has to cop that problem is the typist.

So work organisation is a simple, easy thing to look at. The point is to ensure that work is done at a constant rate, with adequate breaks in between, and that people aren't having to do big binges of work at one time, and nothing at another time. That's really important, and shouldn't cost a thing.

*Has it been shown that a given volume of work, regulated over a period of time, is less dangerous than the same amount of work concentrated in a short space of time?*

I think that's fairly well accepted. Certainly the precipitating events that people come with usually relate to a period where they've had to push themselves to do an extraordinarily large amount of work that they're not used to.

The second point is the one

relating to equipment. There are certain rules about the ways in which equipment should be set up, relating to the heights of desks, the types of desks, the availability of foot-stools, the placing of the machine on the desk, the placing of the copy in relation to the machine. All these things are important in determining the posture that the person adopts while operating the machine. If the posture is stressed in any way the likelihood of an injury is so much greater. It's important to understand the best way to set up the machine.

The other point to understand is that it's all very well spending a lot of money on a nice new word processor, but if you just stick it on the kitchen table, that's quite inadequate. It's important to regard the furniture surrounding a piece of new technology as being just as important as the new technology itself, because if you just stick your word processor on the kitchen table and start using it, there's a very high risk that you're going to create problems.

*So for businesses that don't have a lot of money to spend, it's a false economy to skimp on that kind of thing.*

Absolutely. It's a matter of thinking ergonomics, thinking about the design of your furniture before you get it, rather than buying something and then finding out later you've got to replace it with something more expensive. Also, there are certain types of keyboards that are more suitable than others. For instance the flatter the keyboard in terms of its thickness above the desk the better. So it's better to go for a fairly thin keyboard, rather than one with a steep rise.

*To what extent have the unions now taken this up as an industrial issue?*

Some have taken it up to quite a degree, others not at all. Some unions have done a lot of work on the issue, and are promoting the issue among their members. One of the biggest problem areas of course is the public service, and in some areas there have been major problems of access to workplaces. But that's beginning to change.



## Discussion

# What is a Co-op?

What is the fundamental difference between a co-operative and other forms of economic organisation, such as companies? There are several ways of looking at this question, but the basic answer relates to the control of capital and of surpluses.

### Control of Capital

A co-operative is a limited liability enterprise in which the rights and prerogatives of management belong to the members, on the basis of the membership, and not to shareholders according to the amount of capital they have contributed to the enterprise.

What, however, is "capital"? Most simply put, capital is "work that has been done". It is accumulated labor. A machine is a machine because someone worked to build it. It has value because people worked to convert a mass of ore in the ground, through various processes, into a machine. So it is not capital which creates value, any more than a lump of ore can turn itself into a machine. Value is created by labor.

In a capital-based system, however, capital becomes the organising principle of production. Machines are needed to produce and therefore it is impossible for the individual laborer to work without access to the machine, the capital equipment. Thus, in a capitalist company, capital organises labor to produce value, by means of the production and sale of commodities, in order to provide a profit and return on the capital, even though it is the labor which has created the value.

In a co-operative, however, especially a workers' self-managed co-operative, control is vested in the members of the co-operative itself, regardless of the capital contributed. In these circumstances, the prerogatives of ownership belong to labor, the creators of value. This means that labor organises capital, either

directly or by delegation, and the surpluses are returned to labor.

### What happens to profits?

In a co-operative, we do not refer to a profit but to a surplus. This is not just a pedantic differentiation, used because profit is a dirty word. It reflects an economic difference in the way in which it is accounted for. In a private or public company, the surplus, which is the amount of value extracted from labor over and above the amount needed to cover the costs of production, is transformed into the profit for the owner or owners of the enterprise. In a co-operative enterprise, the surplus is not transformed into profit on capital. It remains the surplus of labor, at the disposal of the enterprise.

It is up to the members of a co-operative to decide how the surplus is to be distributed. Some of the surplus, indeed in most enterprises, most of the surplus, will go toward reinvestment. By this is meant the maintenance and expansion of the means of production, such as the capital equipment. The rest of the surplus may be returned to members, not on the basis of their shareholding, which would be to convert a surplus into a profit, but on the basis of their labor in a form that is agreed on by the membership, which is to say the workers. The workers may choose to distribute the surplus among themselves, either in the form of wage bonuses or in the form of a superannuation fund, or they may use it to develop means of common benefit such as housing or recreation facilities.

### Who owns the capital of a co-operative?

A co-operative is a different type of legal entity to a private or public company, and as a result the property relations within it are different. The thing to remember is that the capital of

a co-operative is not alienable, at least not to the same extent that it is in a capitalist enterprise. This means that the capital cannot be bought, sold, or converted into a commodity. It is the alienability of capital that constitutes the central property relationship in a capitalist enterprise. In a co-operative, capital cannot be individualised or liquidated by a shareholder selling their shares.

In a co-operative, the ownership of capital lies with the whole membership, and therefore since it is owned socially it can only be disposed of socially. If an individual withdraws from a co-operative (for instance if, in a workers co-operative, they cease to be a worker), then all they can take out is the equity which they contributed to the co-operative. This equity cannot appreciate in value, nor can it be sold on the open market, as this will allow for the development of alienable capital and hence alienated labor.

The ownership of a co-operative is social in another sense. And this is that the capital (and of course the labor) is part of the co-operative sector, and it is fairly difficult to transfer it out of this sector. This means that if a co-operative dissolves, the assets cannot be divided up between the membership (thus becoming a form of profit), but must be transferred to other co-operatives to contribute to their expansion and development. This, again, is to prevent the labour of workers in the co-operative sector being easily converted into alienated property. ■

Jim Asker

Brunswick Italo-Australian  
Employment Co-op.

## Discussion

The Discussion section is intended as a forum for debate for all sections of the co-operative movement. Contributions are welcome, and should be sent to *The Co-operator*, PO Box 21, Carlton South 3053, Victoria. All contributions must carry the name and address of the author.

# The Co-operative Movement: Where to From Here?

If you saw the advertisement in the *Age* or were one of the 500 who attended the conference on co-operation held on June 23rd, then you are aware of the impending changes to Victorian co-operatives legislation.

A review of the Co-operation Act is being conducted by the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Co-operation (MACC). The committee was established by the Ministry of Housing in February of this year. If matters raised at the conference give any indication, then this review will dramatically affect the future of the "co-operative movement" in Victoria.

Topics raised at the conference included the role of government and trade unions in co-operative development, co-operative funding and the development of worker co-operative structures.

However, what many people are asking now is, where to from here? The decision must be made quickly, because timetables allow nine weeks for public comment and submissions. This period runs out on August 31st.

Many are still trying to get their heads around the issues addressed in the government's information paper titled *The Development of the Co-operative Movement in Victoria*. A vast number of groups which will be affected by the legislation find the paper difficult to read and, therefore, impossible to comment on.

A booklet produced by the Transnational Co-operative and the Labour Resource Centre titled *Worker Co-operatives in New South Wales and Victoria* provides a clearer summary of the issues, but is as yet unavailable to the public.

Once you are familiar with the issues, there are two forms of action to be taken. You can make a submission to MACC (deadline August 31st), and you may be able to join one of four working parties investigating community service co-operatives, consumer co-operatives, worker/industrial co-operatives and trading/marketing co-operatives.

How one goes about joining these working parties is still unclear. Equally unclear are methods being used to recruit people to the working parties. Some sectors of the "co-operative movement" are in their formative stages (for instance, worker co-operatives), and so they are not readily identified or easily contacted. These problems of communication are exacerbated by the lack of adequate resourcing of working parties.

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A third way groups may have input to co-operative legislation is to request that they also be interviewed by the MACC worker employed to interview co-operatives funded under the Co-operative Development Program. The information gathered by this worker is to form the basis of a joint submission to MACC.

The working parties will meet until the end of September, when an interim report on co-operation will be released. Just how much of this report will reflect the findings of the working parties is uncertain. The final decision-making body for co-operative policy is MACC, whose membership is largely drawn from government ranks.

Given the constraints discussed above, it is clear that individual groups must devote considerable

time and energy in order to have input to the legislation.

In response to this, a group of concerned co-operatives met on Tuesday, July 24th to discuss the issues and to plan some form of collective action.

Changes to co-operative legislation are long overdue and the government's initiative must be welcomed by many groups who find the current legislation overly complicated and prohibitive. However, MACC must ensure that interested groups and individuals are given the sort of information and time-lines which would allow them to have significant input into legislation. The new legislation must ensure a future for all co-operatives. ■

Christine Mitchell

Libby Stewart

Employ Publishing Group

## G.P. Transport Becomes a Co-op

G.P. Transport is a courier service operating in the Melbourne metropolitan area. They are at present going through the process of registering as a co-operative. G.P. was established by a group of motorcycle and van couriers when, late last year, they were faced with unemployment due to the impending collapse of the company they were working for.

As well as looking for employment security, the couriers were tired of working for lousy commissions and overbearing bosses. They decided to introduce worker participation in decision-making. The group meets fortnightly to discuss major issues such as purchase of capital equipment and expansion of services.

Certain responsibilities are delegated to individual members, but most work is subject to daily discussion in the office. For instance, although the office co-ordinator is responsible for incoming calls and accepting jobs, the couriers work out among themselves who does which deliveries, according to their

knowledge of traffic conditions and their vehicle capacities. This overcomes the problem that occurs in other courier companies of favoritism and competition between couriers.

Since January 1984 the group has been successfully managing the courier service under the name "Customised Couriers", a derivative of the original company's name, in order to retain the company's established clients. The client list had been steadily dwindling as a result of the original employer's mismanagement. Now, through its new management and improved service, G.P. has reversed this trend. They have also been able to expand their operations to include furniture and motorcycle rescue services.

G.P. is critical of the slowness of the co-operative registration process. For example, formation papers took two months to arrive after the initial application. The group feels that the process should be speeded up so that co-ops can begin operation as registered bodies as quickly as possible. This, they feel, especi-

ally applies in cases such as G.P., where the business is already well-established and a viable proposition.

They also feel that it would be useful if the services of the Co-operative Development Program were more widely advertised. G.P. say that they only heard about C.D.P.'s services by chance. They suggest that it would be helpful if prospective co-ops received information about C.D.P. as soon as they applied for registration.

After hearing about C.D.P., G.P. attended the June seminar at the Exhibition Building, on "The Development of the Co-operative Movement in Victoria". Although much of what was said was not immediately relevant to the group's circumstances, they had the opportunity to discover other co-operatives similar to their own, and managed to obtain valuable information as a result. They also decided to borrow the new videotape "Workplace Democracy, The Co-operative Way" from the Ministry of Employment and Training. They also look forward to the Ministry publishing comprehensive information on co-operatives that would be relevant to G.P.'s current needs.

For the future, G.P. plans to use the services of other co-operatives as much as possible. In addition, they are considering sharing their computer facilities with other groups. Co-operatives requiring courier services are welcome to contact G.P. Transport for rates and information on (03) 481 2155. Their courier services picks up and delivers envelopes and parcels up to 30kg anywhere within the metropolitan area. They offer a 24-hour a day, seven day a week service, and promise prompt, reliable deliveries. The motorcycle rescue service takes petrol to any rider who has run out, and transports "unstartables" to the owner's home or to a mechanic. Discounts of 10% are offered to students, unemployed people and pensioners/beneficiaries for both furniture removals and motorcycle jobs. ■

Sue Armstrong

Jonathan Goodfield

on behalf of G.P. Transport



## Reviews

### It's Everyone's Business

*It's Everyone's Business* is a new manual of budgeting and book-keeping produced by the Victorian Ministry of Housing. Its author, Sharon Staines, works with the Collingwood, Richmond and Fitzroy Credit Co-operative and has wide experience with community groups.

The manual, which was designed specifically for rental housing co-operative members, but which will have relevance for all co-operatives and other community groups, seeks to set out the mysteries of budgeting and book-keeping in plain English, so that "every member of a community-based group has the

opportunity to learn what their money is doing."

The manual is divided into sections, each of which can be taken on its own. If you want to know how to do a bank reconciliation or set up a petty cash book, all you have to do is look at the contents and refer to the appropriate section.

The first section looks at the importance of planning and budgeting. The rest of the manual is devoted to the book-keeping system as it relates to the day-to-day administration of a co-operative. Topics covered include cash flow budgets, banking systems, cash receipt records, purchasing and payment systems, preparing financial statements, auditing and year-end books. A glossary provides concise explanations and definitions of all accounting terms used in the manual.

The producers of the manual

believe that there is a need for information of this kind to be produced in a form accessible to community groups such as co-operatives. "In Australia", they note, "the traditional decision-making method has been either to rely on intuition or call in an expert. Fortunately, there is growing recognition throughout the community that while information means power, it may as well be written in Swahili if you don't have the know-how to interpret it."

"The problem with passing the buck on financial planning is that you become dependent on experts. Where members of a group have no idea what is going on, the way is paved for the experts to take control."

Copies of *It's Everyone's Business* are available from Collingwood, Richmond and Fitzroy Credit Co-operative for \$15 plus \$2 postage. Their address is 140 Hoddle St, Abbotsford. Copies are also available from the Publicity Section of the Ministry of Housing, at 250 Elizabeth St, Melbourne. ■

Continued from page 8

tions policies, research facilities, access to industry insurance and superannuation schemes and the like.

3. Equity and distribution of surplus. We have chosen to set our equity requirement for membership at a modest level, in keeping with the ability of the average worker-member to contribute. However, we believe that part of the distribution of surplus should be by additional share issues from time to time, thus increasing the members' financial involvement, while retaining cash within the co-operative for improvement of working conditions and for expansion.

4. Government involvement. With all the goodwill in the world, a conversion co-op will not get off the ground without adequate funding to ensure a financially viable operation. As a general rule, workers' co-ops will be formed from the shop floor, by people without the financial resources to capitalise the project and attract traditional sources of finance. Workers' co-ops should not need government grants; they

will need loans, at favourable interest rates, with emphasis on the provision of venture capital."

The Minister of Housing, Mr Cathie, gave the closing address. He said that the seminar had shown that co-operation was a potentially significant form of economic enterprise. However, he said, the principles of co-operation and the nature and structure of co-operative enterprises appeared to be poorly understood.

"I believe we have heard today why co-operation has an attraction to people who seek to develop the social and economic welfare of our community", he said. "It is precisely the commitment of co-operators to broader human values other than the simple pursuit of individual gain which is the great strength of the movement."

"There is clearly a need for a more effective system of democratic control by people over their lives. And these must not be tokenism or half measures. People must be provided with incentives to put the interests of the community before their

own interests. They will only do this if they feel they have access to real power and to the wealth and resources which our society most clearly can deliver.

"The availability of finance for co-operative development is a central question, and one which has been addressed in a number of overseas countries. The role which a co-operative bank could play has been the subject of much discussion within the movement. This is an option which must be pursued even if it remains some years off. In the meantime, I believe that significant financial support can be mobilised by the movement for its development. This is an important and exciting area which we will all be watching closely.

"The state government recently completed a review of financial institutions for which I am responsible as Minister of Housing. The review report contains a number of recommendations which should ensure that the co-operative structure of credit co-operatives within the co-operative movement as a whole is a major





MEAT

generated by the co-operative movement with government funds to provide housing for low-income people.

"I might close by reflecting for a moment on the historical roots of co-operation. These lie deep in the early years of the industrial revolution in England and Europe. That was an age when the 'competitive pressures of the market place' were real and immediate, where failure meant utter ruin and starvation, social welfare meant the poor-house, dissent meant beatings, imprisonment, transportation or death. It is in this environment that co-operation emerged. It is possibly this fact alone which best attests to the relevance of co-operation in the modern world. Co-operation was a response of common people to the great social and economic upheavals which signalled the birth of the modern era. I believe the relevance of those principles is with us still, and that the co-operative movement has much to offer the modern world as we deal with the problems which face us today." ■

● Mr Ian Cathie

theme of this seminar and the review. There is an important need for legislative change to facilitate the various initiatives which we have discussed today. The development of a new Co-operation Act should involve the broadest possible community consultation.

"A comparatively new area where the co-operative principles are being applied is in the development of Rental Housing Co-operatives (RHC's). The Ministry of Housing has a successful program under way at present invol-

ving the co-operative management of ministry housing stock. It is also investigating the possibility that a similar program can be developed whereby the stock would be owned and managed by individual co-operatives. The development of this proposal has been undertaken by officers of the ministry in broad consultation with members of the co-operative movement, community groups, and in particular, with the Victorian Credit Co-operatives Association. An important feature of this option, if successful, will be that it will mix funds



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